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DIGEST OF PERIODICAL LITERATURE

Conducted by ELVIRA D. CABELL, Chicago Normal College

GRAMMAR MADNESS

To *School and Home Education* for March Thomas J. McCormack contributes a paper on "The History of the Science of Grammar and Its Lessons for the Teaching of English," in which he links together as effect and cause the impoverishment of American speech today and the concentration of attention in American schools upon formal grammar.

A search for historic connections between the study of grammar and the development of power in the use of language discloses chiefly the lack of any connection at all. The presence of grammar in the schools goes back in unbroken line to the language interests of Greek philosophers; yet "the Greek of the fourth century B.C. would as soon have thought of devising grammar to teach his children Greek as a fish would think of writing a treatise on swimming to teach fishlets to swim." Long after the glory of Greek literature, unaided by knowledge of "passive" and "active," "indicative" and "subjunctive," had reached its climax, the science of grammar was developed in Alexandria to teach foreigners Greek. In the same way, in the Late Latin period of decadence of culture, grammar became a fetish in Rome and was developed as "an instrument for torturing Latin into Latin heads." After the Renaissance the Latin textbook was foisted upon the English language and luckless children were trained to explain and test their quite different speech by the forms of a foreign language, though Chaucer's ignorance of these forms proved no disability.

But it has been in America that "the grammatical plan" of teaching English has been systematically developed. The system of public instruction in America is still, the writer thinks, largely mediaeval and in no way more conspicuously so than in the barren and artificial exercises in English grammar persisting in the grammar schools. The "Open Sesame" to "composition," that is, to free and vigorous expression, for American children as for children of any other nation or age, is incessant practice. Instruction should follow, not precede, composition. Not by an agonized concentration upon mistakes can the threatened decadence of our English speech be averted.

CHILDREN'S VOCABULARIES AND SPEECH

The March number of the *Pedagogical Seminary* contains four articles of immediate interest to the teacher of English. A discussion by Margaret Morse Nice of "The Development of a Child's Vocabulary in Relation to Environment," is followed by two studies of a child's vocabulary, by Mildred Langenbeck and George C. Brandenburg respectively, and these by "A Case of Retarded Speech Development," by Alice C. Hinckley. The mental immaturity of a normal child up to the age of four, as evidenced by the small number of words for time, the inadequate conception of space, and the absence of abstract words in her vocabulary, is the most important conclusion of the first article; in a vocabulary of 1,870 words, only 38 are classified as abstract. The second study is of a precocious child of five years of age, whose responses in a series of Binet tests gave her mentality as that of eleven years; her vocabulary of 6,837 words is given in full. Professor Brandenburg's study of the vocabulary of his three-year-old daughter includes the unusual features of a record of the child's conversation for an entire day, and "sub-conscious" vocabulary. Certain of his conclusions are as follows: (1) Words do not function grammatically in the early stages of linguistic development; a word may be a symbol for an object one moment, for an action the next, and for a quality at another time, or it may represent several parts of speech at once. (2) Acquisition of words is chiefly a matter of imitation, and hence depends almost wholly upon environment. (3) Association with other children is conducive neither to the development of a good vocabulary nor to good linguistic expression; in the case of this little girl, there were unmistakable signs of retardation in her language development during months when she played freely with other children. (4) As the tendency to vocal expression is instinctive and gives rise to an almost continuous flow of language, any system of training for young children is defective which does not provide for constant, well-directed linguistic exercise. (5) The use of baby talk by the child's associates is detrimental to his mental as well as to his linguistic development.

A "VIA MEDIA" IN READING

In an article in the *American Schoolmaster* for March entitled "The Teaching of Reading," William B. Arbaugh devotes most of his attention to the time in the child's life at which instruction in reading should be begun. In regard to this problem, he remarks, expert opinions are

widely divergent. There are those who assume that since reading is an important acquisition and since children begin school at the ages of five or six, reading should necessarily be the main work of the first and second grades. Others believe, on the basis of the findings of child physiology and psychology, that the age of nine or ten is not late for beginning this activity. Reviewing the reasons for the latter opinion, he admits the strain on the young child's eye caused by the multitude and delicacy of the movements required in reading, the disadvantage of long periods of sitting still over a book at a time when life is essentially motion, the forcing of the immature mind, by the processes called for in reading, the fallacy of the idea that ability to read is the only avenue to knowledge. The objective interests of the world, the interests of play, he believes, take precedence of books in the first years of life. On the other side, he considers that the improved system of education, particularly of education through reading, and the importance of books in modern life justify the introduction of a child to reading at the age of seven, provided that the proper preparation has actually been made and a natural desire to read developed through opportunities "to speak and to listen, to observe and to remember, to know something of the world around him." He points out the contradiction between the system of Madame Montessori and the approved "sentence method" of the schools. While believing in word drill and analysis, he stresses most the necessity of a plastic and varied method, if children are to love books and to acquire the power of reading them easily and rapidly.

AN INVITATION TO DISCUSSION

In the opening paragraphs of an article entitled "Primary Reading" in the *Catholic Educational Review* for April, the writer, Dr. Thomas Edward Shields, who is also one of the editors of the *Review*, announces a series of articles on the subject and invites discussion and questions from all who are interested.

The basis for these articles is to be in large part the recent book by Paul Klapper, *Teaching Children to Read*. The topics treated in the introductory article are: (1) The "elements" and purposes of reading, as set forth by Dr. Klapper: thought-getting, proper vocalization, literary appreciation; (2) the physical process of reading and the strain involved therein upon children's eyes and minds; (3) requirements in the way of texts and types. Abundant excerpts from the book are given.